

Civil and Religious Life in North Africa
on the Basis of the Recently Found Augustinian Letters:
The Methods of *Defensio* in Augustine's Correspondence

Summary

The present dissertation includes the first complete Hungarian translation and critical examination of the letters of Aurelius Augustinus (St. Augustine) which were recently found in two codices as a result of the work of Johannes Divjak, professor of Vienna. The discovery and publishing of the 29 additional letters in 1981 is of great significance, since new manuscripts do not typically turn up nowadays; researchers mainly deal with those found and copied by, or at the orders of, Humanist scholars for the coming generations. Professor Divjak arranged a critical edition of the letters on the basis of the new manuscripts, and a number of studies were also published by various authors addressing particular issues in these recently found letters.

The majority of these Augustinian letters are connected with the episcopal activities of their author giving advice in the daily affairs, sometimes legal problems, of the people who turned to him for help and asking for his intervention. These writings testify of the work of the Bishop of Hippo as an organizer of the Church, sometimes touch upon issues of textual criticism, theology and philosophy, but what is of central significance in my research, they also contain much new information regarding the life and society of the fourth-century Africa Province of Rome. They inform us of the social tensions, heretic movements, the everyday life of the elite of Roman culture living in Africa. The letters are sometimes as long as treatises and, according to contemporary customs, the addressees did not just read them, but passed or sent them along to their acquaintances and friends. This could be the case either because the contents may have been of interest, or because others may have learnt how to decide in similar disputes if asked to act as episcopal arbiters, or because the letters contained the interpretation of a difficult literary text or the description of events that for whatever reason could be educational for others.

As a first step in my research, I made the first full Hungarian translation of this collection of letters complete with commentary, and then I examine them in terms of what new information they may provide for the investigation of the historical and social conditions

of the declining Roman Empire of the fourth century. The dissertation focuses on the phenomenon of *defensio* in more detail. Of the extensive and thematically varied correspondence, I concentrated on those letters where the author intercedes on behalf of someone, defends individuals or groups in a difficult or critical situation. Therefore, I draw my conclusions mainly on the basis of the examination of specific, individual cases described in the letters; others works of Augustinus are involved in the investigation by way of looking for principles in them on the basis of which the author may have acted in the specific cases presented in the letters. The answer I am seeking while focusing on the recent letters discovered in the 1980s is in what new ways they contribute, in comparison with the formerly known letters, to our understanding of the society of Africa Province in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. The first task in the analysis of the cases is to establish the actual relationships and the historical context, the facts of who is defended by Augustinus from whom or what, as well as what the antecedents, circumstances, and analogies, if any, may be. The question of method, i.e. the structure of the defense is explored by a close reading of the text of the letters, including the technique of persuasion and the system of argumentation in them. For the purpose of defending the individual at hand, Augustinus would try to induce someone into action, and the linguistic signs of such persuasion are discernible in the text, while the complex network of power relations and the place and influence of Bishop Augustinus become apparent. It is noteworthy that in most cases he only threatens to use legal means, and the culprits usually receive more lenient punishments than prescribed by law. In addition to the legal means, another important aspect of these intercessions and interventions is the *auctoritas* of Augustinus. The objective defined in the letters, intercession with the secular powers (*intercessio apud saeculi potestates*), was successful only if appropriate style was used. Therefore, I also examine the stylistic differences between the letters, if adjustment to the addressee is also manifest in them.

A detailed analysis of these letters will contribute to scholarship on the social history of the late antiquity, while the recently discovered and translated letters will improve and enrich our understanding of Augustinus and his age.

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